Perfume
A PROHIBITION-ERA MYSTERY
In 1983 the Minnesota Historical Society acquired a glass container of amber-colored Lucky Lindy perfume from a local antique dealer. Our primary interest in the bottle was its connection to Charles Lindbergh. It has been displayed at Lindbergh’s childhood home in Little Falls, along with numerous other products named after the famous aviator. Thirty years later, in 2013, MNHS acquired two more glass containers of perfume from a different local dealer. One of these, another bottle of Lucky Lindy, was nearly identical to the one already in the collections. The other, labeled Swee-Tone, held a dark-green fluid. Both were manufactured by the Nipola Company of St. Paul. While a committee considered acquiring the latest bottles, several staff members conducted preliminary research into the company and discovered an intriguing connection to the Prohibition era: Nipola was one of numerous parties indicted by a federal grand jury in 1930, after a large, multistate investigation into illegal uses of alcohol.

A number of questions had immediately arisen when these two bottles were offered to us. Foremost, perhaps, was their size. Like the one acquired in 1983, these glass containers hold one gallon of fluid. Why would anyone buy perfume in gallon jugs? Adding to our curiosity was the report that all three bottles had been discovered in the 1960s behind a false wall at St. Paul’s Ancker Hospital. It appears that both antique dealers had acquired the bottles from another local man, a picker—someone who seeks inexpensive antiques and other curiosities and profits from their resale. Pickers use their deep knowledge of historical artifacts to identify treasures that others may not recognize. According to one of the dealers, the picker had a friend working on a demolition crew at the campus of Ancker Hospital, and when a warehouse was being razed, 70 gallons of Nipola perfume came to light.1

While these jugs did not have much monetary value, I felt that they must have an interesting history and a story to tell. As the senior objects conservator at the MNHS, my charge is to preserve the institution’s collections and help others interpret them. I decided to try to find out what exactly was in those bottles in order to better understand their origins and learn their story.

I began by conducting research into perfume to learn how it differs from liquor. The first paragraphs of Edwin T. Morris’s 1984 book, Fragrance, almost perfectly summarized my feelings for this topic.

When I first became interested in the history of perfumes . . . I felt embarrassed, as if I were researching trivia or had become the archivist of idleness . . . . For most of us, scents are not necessities; they fit into the category of “frills.” . . . But despite [my] reservations . . . the subject of the aromatic plants, their uses and applications, and the wizardry of the sense of olfaction proved so intriguing that I could not put my investigations aside. . . . I came to feel less apologetic about this seemingly insignificant topic of research as I realized how influential smells can be in our behavior and how our ancestors put enormous store in products of fragrance, going to any length to procure them. They ransacked nature in search of beautiful and different aromas despite wars, revolutions, plagues, and pestilence.2

I might add that I prefer to avoid nearly all scents and perfumes, which often seem excessive and can give me (like many others) a headache or make me feel ill. I am, however, fascinated by the organic chemistry behind them, as well as their history.

The word perfume comes from the Latin words per (through) and fumum (smoke), indicating that it probably originated from the use of incense. France and the United States have been and continue to be, by far, the major manufacturers and consumers of fragrance in the world. Modern perfume is commonly a mixture of ethyl alcohol (the solvent or extender) and one or more essential oils. The proportions usually cited are about 80 percent alcohol and 20 percent essential oils, though the oil content can be higher. Eau de toilette (toilet water), typically a much thinner dilution

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than perfume, is about 95 percent alcohol. *Eau de Cologne*, intended for either men or women, is similar to *eau de toilette* but may contain some added glycerin. After shave, meant for use by men, often has the strongest scent—it is about 60 percent alcohol and 40 percent essential oil.³

The word *eau* (water) in the two French terms above apparently goes back to the earliest observations of distilled alcohol by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europeans. They were confused by the similarities and differences of alcohol and water, referring to alcohol as water of wine, oil of wine, or burning water. Alcohol crossed boundaries of the assumed order of the natural world; some thought it was a fifth essence that complemented the four other essences: water, air, earth, and fire.⁴

Since humans can detect some essential oils at infinitesimally low concentrations, only tiny amounts need be used in perfumes. Most people can detect musk and vanilla at a parts-per-million or even parts-per-billion level, which is quite remarkable for a species not particularly known for its sense of smell. Typically, water is also added to perfumes, often simply to reduce the cost but also to extend the persistence of the perfume on the skin. The amount of water is limited, however; if it approaches 50 percent, the essential oils start to fall out of solution and turn the perfume milky white—proof of the old adage that oil and water do not mix.⁵

Perfumes are almost always stored and sold in sealed glass containers to prevent the alcohol from quickly evaporating and the essential oils from degrading through exposure to excessive oxygen. In addition, some essential oils can react and degrade other materials, particularly some types of plastic. Storing perfume in glass goes all the way back to the ancient Egyptians, and archaeologists have recovered many glass perfume bottles from ancient Egypt and the Fertile Crescent.⁶

Historically, leather goods were perfumed, which is not surprising; producing leather is a smelly task, and animal skins (and fur) readily absorb and retain scents—as do human skin and hair. Victorian textile manufacturers quickly learned that paisley cloth that did not smell of Indian patchouli would not sell well. Today, we expect to find perfume in soaps, powders, and other cosmetics. Indeed, it is almost ubiquitous in many products, including detergents, cleaners, paint, rubber, plastic, paper and paper goods, diapers, and even cars. Scents may be added to mask an unpleasant odor or spur a sale—and in those cases, manufacturers usually take great pains to keep buyers unaware of the addition.⁷

At that time, it was located southeast of downtown St. Paul, near the current site of the St. Paul Public Schools Administration Building (360 Colbourne Street). In 1965 the buildings on this site were abandoned when Ancker moved to the intersection of Jackson Street and University Avenue and was renamed St. Paul-Ramsey Hospital. (In 1997 it became Regions Hospital.)⁸ By the late 1960s the old buildings had been torn down; during demolition in 1967, the false warehouse wall was discovered hiding the 70-or-so large glass jugs of Nipola perfume.

Not much is known about the company—except that numerous newspapers, both locally and around the country, reported that it was involved in a grand jury indictment following a bust of a large, illegal liquor ring in February 1930, three years before the end of Prohibition. The newspapers probably shared the same source (apparently, the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*), as their stories agree on specific names and numbers. The *Minneapolis Tribune* referred to the bust as “the largest liquor conspiracy since the enactment of national prohibition.” Based in Chicago, the conspiracy spread its tentacles...
nationwide, having operations in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Louis, and both Newark and North Bergen, New Jersey—many of which are known historic centers of organized crime. More than 150 individuals and over 30 corporations were alleged to have been involved with the scheme. The allegations specified that about one million gallons of industrial alcohol, which was legal during Prohibition for certain purposes (including making perfume), had been illegally diverted into liquor over a seven-year period. It was estimated that the conspiracy had netted more than 35 million dollars.9

On February 11, 1930, the Minneapolis Tribune named Anastasoff Srebren, “a Bulgarian perfume chemist of international reputation” as the principal defendant and the operation’s kingpin. Reportedly, he had “discovered a method of extracting essential oils from perfumes and toilet waters,” and he and his co-conspirators had “for seven years converted the products into drinkable liquor.” The newspaper went on to state that Srebren had come to the United States in 1923 as an employee of Joubert Cie Inc., one of the indicted New York-based firms. He appeared on the payroll of most of the 30-plus other corporations under indictment, and he was usually listed as some sort of advisor to still operators. Many of these corporations claimed to be cosmetic companies; allegedly, they received deliveries from other companies that had a legal license to deal in industrial alcohol during Prohibition. The allegations imply that these cosmetic companies were simply “cover houses” for distilling the products into liquor. Among the other individuals reported to be under indictment were three Twin Cities residents directly affiliated with the Nipola Company.10

That day’s Tribune also reported the “overt act” that caused Nipola to be indicted in “the giant conspiracy.” On June 20, 1929, company president “Ted” Sinykin sold 5,000 gallons of toilet water to an M. Goldman of the Bourday Company, “assumed to be located in Minneapolis.” While Nipola held a legal permit to obtain alcohol for manufacturing purposes, Goldman did not. (Neither Bourday nor Goldman showed up in a search of Minneapolis city directories.)

The earliest public record I could find of Nipola is in the 1927 St. Paul City Directory, which lists Arthur T. Sinykin as the manager and shows the business address as 102 East Third Street. The Minnesota Secretary of State’s records have one reference to the Nipola Company, indicating that it filed papers to incorporate on August 10, 1928. By 1929 the St. Paul City Directory lists Sinykin as president and manager, and the business has moved to 518 North Snelling Avenue. The next year several other staff members appear in the directory, including Betty J. Sinykin (Arthur’s wife), vice president, and Carl E. Amenrud of Minneapolis, secretary and treasurer; these two and Arthur Sinykin are the three people named in the indictment. The 1933 city directory entry advertises, “The Nipola Company, Inc., Swee-Tone products and cosmetics.” By that date, the business encompassed both 518 and 520 Snelling and had acquired a telephone line (Midway 8886). The last city directory listing for Nipola that I found was in 1934, and it shows only A. T. Sinykin, president; the address is simply 518 Snelling. It would appear that the indictment did not immediately cause Nipola to close, but shortly after Prohibition ended in 1933, the company disappeared from the city directory listings.11

Various online genealogical sources and the federal census reveal that Arthur Sinykin (1892–1976) was married to Betty Sinykin (1900–?), and they had two young children at the time of the indictment (a third was born in 1931). Both were naturalized U.S. citizens, having immigrated in 1903—Arthur from Russia and Betty from Romania. One potentially damning record I found in the 1914 St. Paul City Directory shows Nipola’s future president as running the Arthur T. Sinykin wholesale liquor store. The 1940 federal census also lists him as the owner of a retail liquor store. Clearly, Sinykin had a sincere interest in alcohol. When the news of the 1930 indictment broke, the St. Paul Pioneer Press interviewed Betty Sinykin, who professed to be “thunderstruck” at the charges. She went on to say that her husband had left several days earlier for Battle Creek, Michigan, where he was being treated for an unspecified illness. She also stated that she had not been active in the company for two years.12

As for Nipola’s secretary-treasurer, the newspaper simply reported that Amenrud “was not available for
FREE! $1.00 in Trade on Every Purchase of $3.00 or Over.
This Offer Good for SIXTY DAYS ONLY
INCLUDE CHECK, MONEY ORDER OR DRAFT TO AVOID DELAY IN SHIPPING.

Something New—Swee-Tone Gives Fragrance to Your Home

NEW WAY—HIGH GRADE HOME PERFUME SPRAY
SWEE-TONE takes the place of incense in your home, office or store. As it gives no smoke, and is never heavy or oppressive, everyone finds it much more satisfactory.
SWEE-TONE gives a delightful odor, refreshes the premises, and is a deodorizer and germicide as well. It is a “Many-Purpose” perfume—a standard, high grade product. You will like it.
SWEE-TONE removes cooking odors; prevents moths; kills damp, moldy smells; perfumes the bathroom; destroys body odors; removes gasoline and carbon smells from your car; takes the place of bath salts. Try it on your handkerchief or lapel. Economical in price. “A Nice Perfume for Nice People.”

DIRECTIONS—Shake bottle well before using and spray freely. Do not spray on polished furniture. You will be pleased with the lasting fragrance of the new Swee-Tone Odor, and with the feeling of health and cleanliness that results from its daily use.
SWEE-TONE is now used from coast to coast by the following leading concerns: Theatres, hotels, dance halls, restaurants, cafes, cabarets, bus stations, taxicab companies, transit companies, hospitals, drug and department stores, and all public institutions and homes.

Introductory Special Offer on Swee-Tone

1 Quart Size (Regular Price) ...... $3.00
1 High Grade De Vilbiss Atomizer ... 1.50
(Regular Price) $4.50

For Only $3.50

Gives Fragrance to the Home with the Odor of Swee-Tone

SWEE-TONE (Original) GALLON SIZES

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QUANTITY LOTS—Write for Quotations.
FREE HAND SPRAY WITH EACH ORDER.

THE NIPOLA CO., Inc.
Manufacturers of Swee-Tone, Saniform and Glo-Foam Products
SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA
comment.” I could find very little about Carl Amenrud (ca. 1890–1968). According to the federal census, he was born in Minnesota; he may have been from Willmar, as that city’s Tribune listed someone by that name as a member of the Willmar Home Guard in 1918, and his age at that time—28—matches the requirement that volunteers be at least 26. The 1930 Minneapolis City Directory lists a Carl E. Amenrud as married and living at 3435 Thirty-Eighth Avenue South, and that year’s census confirms his job as Nipola’s secretary-treasurer. By 1940 he had moved to Spokane, Washington, and owned a dry-cleaning business. Altogether, it seems that many of the unearthed details surrounding the Nipola Company and its employees do not pass the smell test (pardon the pun), and their timing in relation to Prohibition also seems suspect.

The perfume bottles MNHS acquired are so large that they immediately seem to confirm one’s suspicions. Fortunately, the jugs retain their original labels and were packed in their original cardboard shipping boxes—all of which help us better understand their context. The paper labels on the two containers of Lucky Lindy are quite small and offer little information. In fact, they are about the size of labels on today’s perfume bottles.

The jug of Swee-Tone, on the other hand, has two large paper labels with copious amounts of text that goes to great lengths to explain why such a large quantity of perfume might be sold. Swee-Tone is advertised as a “High Grade THEATRICAL PERFUME” with the curious description “NUIT D’EGYPTE ODOR” (translated roughly from French as the odor of an Egyptian night). As with Charles Lindbergh, references to Egypt were not uncommon in 1920s advertising. Faraway places in general were popular, and interest in Egypt was particularly acute after Howard Carter’s discovery of King

FACING: Swee-Tone advertisement, 1930s, offering “home and office” sizes ranging from four ounces to five gallons. BELOW, LEFT: One-gallon jug of Lucky Lindy, with its comically small label and original shipping box. BELOW, RIGHT: Ample quantity to “Make Your Home Sweet Home with Swee-Tone.”
surprising to many today, Prohibition only addressed the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol; it did not explicitly ban consumption. Any alcohol purchased before Prohibition began could be consumed legally, leading many to stockpile bottles before the deadline. (Naturally, legal supplies rapidly dwindled over the 13 years before repeal.) Additionally, certain alcoholic beverages remained legal under certain conditions. Hard cider, beer, and wine could be made and consumed at home, though selling any was illegal. Religious organizations were allowed to serve sacramental wine, and there are numerous tales of how people may have tried to use that loophole to their advantage.15

Medical usage was also allowed. In addition to being a medical disinfectant, alcohol was frequently included in drugs and medicines, both legitimate and less legitimate. Many of the less- legitimate ones, for which manufacturers often made extravagant claims, were patent medicines that could be prescribed by a doctor willing to look the other way. These preparations, primarily alcohol along with a few minor ingredients said to play a medicinal role, were often made to taste bad in order to discourage abuse. While many of them, at least, may have acted as a placebo, they probably also facilitated the abuse of alcohol or could be habit forming.

Doctors also prescribed medically effective preparations dissolved in alcohol, as some drugs are more efficacious or easily administered that way. Medical usage may explain why the stash of suspicious perfume was found at Ancker Hospital. Prohibition-era laws specified that illicit alcohol captured by authorities must be destroyed, usually by pouring it down a sanitary sewer or storm drain or by bringing it to a hospital. Of course, this does not explain why the jugs were behind a false wall, unless on-site security was a concern.

Finally, some industries were allowed to use alcohol during Prohibition, including the perfume industry. Authorities issued permits for the disbursement and transportation of alcohol to and from these exempted corporations, keeping the quantities secret from the public.16

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Perfumers have a specialized vocabulary to describe scents, and it takes a very practiced, discerning nose to differentiate them. Similar scents are grouped into “accords”; most of the essential oils can be assigned to one of the following seven broad categories.

**FLORAL:** Jasmine, hyacinth, lilac, tuberose, honeysuckle, and gardenia. “Fresher” versions include lily of the valley, orange blossom, violet, carnation, and rose.

**GREEN:** Characterized as “crushed green leaf”; think pine, mint, or herbs. Camphor, often considered medicinal, also has a green or fresh note.

**CITRUS:** Nearly all of these come from fruit rinds—lemon, orange, tangerine, and grapefruit. More exotic, subtle oils from less familiar citrus fruits include bergamot, neroli, and petitgrain.

**ORIENTAL BLENDS:** A heavy scent with a preponderance of animal notes but also spices, incense resins, and woody oils such as sandalwood, cedar, and patchouli.

**CHYPRE TYPES:** French for Cyprus, Chypre is named for the well-known Coty perfume first made in 1917. It is characterized as gum labdanum, oakmoss, bergamot, citrus, and sandalwood.

**ALDEHYDIC:** “Modern,” often largely synthetic perfumes with sharp scents that include the chemical class of compounds known as aldehydes. Chanel No. 5, first sold in 1920, is one of the earliest and most familiar.

**LEATHER/ANIMAL:** The few essential oils derived from animals include musk, from musk deer of western China; ambergris, from sperm whales, a very old, traditional, and rare ingredient; civet, from civet cats of East Africa; and castoreum, from Russian and Canadian beavers, the Canadian being preferred.

There are many subordinate and more subtle accords and sub-accords, such as vanilla, metallic, burnt, anise, or waxy, used alone or in combination with other accords to describe a scent. Perfumers also speak of **tone**, ranging from a sharp or piercing quality to a medium or low tone, which is warm or heavy. **Tenacity**, the ability to linger without significantly diminishing, is enhanced by essential oils that are binders. Another way to measure linger-time is by **top note** (first impression), followed by **middle note** and, finally, **dry out**.

Increasingly, essential oils are synthesized (to reduce cost and avoid killing animals). The human nose, however, prefers at least some natural oils; a fragrance without them is often described as shrill or tinny and may be blamed for provoking headaches.

Source: Edwin Morris, Fragrance, especially pages 10, 12, 47–50, 226, 227, 228, 256.

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Pair of musk deer frolicking on an advertising poster: “The male animal produces the Musk Perfume so celebrated in the Perfumers’ Art.”
remove them completely from the alcohol through distillation—and even trace amounts of these oils are unpleasant to taste—so this tactic seems unlikely.

Without analyzing the contents of the Nipola bottles, we could not be sure of either of the above scenarios. So, I contacted Millis Scientific, Incorporated, in Baltimore, which agreed to analyze three samples: Swee-Tone, Lucky Lindy, and, at their suggestion, a modern perfume for comparison to the older ones. In the fall of 2014 I selected a perfume (the name of which I will not disclose, for legal reasons) at a major department store and sent the three samples off to Maryland.

Of the different instruments that could be used for analysis, Millis Scientific recommended a gas chromatograph mass spectrometer (GCMS). Gas chromatography first vaporizes a complex sample and then passes it through a tube of stationary media that interacts with the sample in different ways, slowing some compounds down more than others. The tube, called a column, is usually very long (several hundred meters) and also very thin (about the diameter of a human hair). The thinner and longer it is, the better it will separate out the various constituents of the sample. A stream of inert gas, such as helium, carries the vapor through the column. Along with separating out the constituent parts, the column also measures retention time—how long it takes the different parts to pass through and exit the tube.

Often, an analyst is able to match the retention time of a known compound to one in the unknown sample, thus tentatively identifying it. However, a gas chromatograph is only as good as its reference set—the universe of known samples that have already been tested and identified. Many technicians share their data in large databases, so that a fairly complete range of chemical retention-time spectra is available to most analysts. But if a sample contains a compound that has never been identified (or is not in the reference set), that compound may not be identifiable.

A GCMS then uses a mass spectrometer to further analyze the different fractions as they come out of the column, breaking the molecules apart into ions and ejecting them. The distance they travel depends on their mass. Analyzing the size of these ions and their travel distance allows for better identification of compounds based on their molecular mass.

In addition, a gas chromatograph measures the quantity of the constituents relative to each other. It can often identify compounds at extremely low levels, typically to a parts-per-million or parts-per-billion basis. This is particularly helpful because perfumes contain only a small percentage of essential oils and, since a particular formula is a blend of several oils, any individual oil may constitute no more than two percent of the entire volume of perfume. Furthermore, some essential oils occur in such low dilutions that they could be considered trace quantities. Gas chromatographs are also accurate and precise enough to identify compounds perhaps not original to the perfume, such as chemical contaminants, minor chemical byproducts, or chemical degradation products. Knowing the relative types and quantities of essential oils allows us to roughly characterize a perfume according to the descriptions used in the industry.

When I bought the modern sample, the salesperson explained that perfumes today have a shelf life: their scent profile will change within a few years, probably due to chemical deterioration. While I thought this might be a ploy to sell more perfume, it also seemed reasonable, as some chemicals will interact with each other, particularly when in a solution together. I have not been able to confirm or refute the shelf-life claim, but it seems

Perfume organ where fragrances are blended, so-called because, as the label at left reads, “perfume is compounded like music.”
likely that perfumes would change over time, especially if exposed to significant amounts of light, heat, or oxygen. Essential oils will polymerize and become gummy and dark with time, but most perfume bottles, if properly sealed, permit little exposure to oxygen. Given the age of the Nipola samples, I expected to see a significant amount of deterioration and degradation products from the essential oils, but I hoped these could be connected to the chemicals of origin.

The analysis results, however, seem to refute suspicions of significant deterioration, possibly because the perfumes were stored in fairly safe, stable (cool and dark) conditions for many years. Gas chromatography identified many distinct compounds in each of our samples: 29 in Lucky Lindy, 30 in the modern perfume, and 33 in Swee-Tone. Many of these compounds appeared in more than one sample; all told, more than 45 different ones were found between the three samples. Three compounds in the Swee-Tone could not be identified, probably because the reference set had no known matches. Of the 45 compounds identified, at least 32 are essential oils and other additives commonly used in the perfume industry, and most of the others appear to be minor contaminants or small quantities of essential-oil degradation products. Another surprising finding was that, although over 75 years separate the formulation of the two Nipola perfumes and the modern one, the new and old samples shared approximately 17 of the average 30 compounds in each. I had expected the perfume industry to have evolved more than this seems to suggest.

Lucky Lindy’s fragrance is made up mostly of floral scents: rose, violet, jasmine, and lilac, with some lingering notes of spiciness, citrus, vanillin, cherry, cedar, and strong almond. Swee-Tone aligns well with its Oriental description, including, as it does, citrus such as bergamot (often compared to the scent of Earl Grey tea), other floral notes such as jasmine, lavender, and violet, woody green scents of pine and cedar, and spicy notes such as coriander and rosemary. Finally, the modern perfume could be described as a woody cedar and juniper with a number of floral notes, including lilac, sweet rose, rose, jasmine, and a lingering fruitiness like apple and pear. Sandalwood, found in varying quantities in all three samples, is often used as a fixative or binder. Diethyl phthalate was also present in all three; a common denaturant of alcohol, it may also have been used as a fixative or binder.

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**Ethyl Alcohol:** Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi of Persia is widely credited with first isolating ethyl alcohol in the ninth or tenth century AD. It is made by fermenting sugar solutions with yeast and distilling the results. One of the world’s oldest recreational drugs, it is often highly regulated and steeply taxed. Most of the one-billion-plus gallons of ethyl alcohol annually produced worldwide is used industrially—as a fuel additive, solvent, or cleaning or antiseptic agent, for example. People consume only about five percent, and a negligible amount is used in perfume. Ethyl alcohol for industrial use is sold at a much lower price than liquor—in a denatured form that can not be safely consumed. Because it is costly and difficult to separate the alcohol from the denaturant, this is an effective way to ensure large-scale availability to industry with a lower risk that it will be misused.

**Methyl Alcohol:** The simplest and smallest alcohol molecule, also known as wood alcohol because it was commonly distilled from wood. It cannot be safely ingested by humans, as it can cause blindness, coma, and death. For this reason, it is commonly used to denature ethyl alcohol; unfortunately, poisoning via methyl alcohol is still common today.

**Isopropyl Alcohol:** Commonly known as rubbing alcohol, this is less toxic than methanol, but also cannot be consumed by humans without causing headache, nausea, or coma. It is typically used as an industrial solvent, industrial fuel, and as a safe and inexpensive household disinfectant.

While mulling these results, which suggest that the Nipola perfume was perfume, I learned of another person who had pursued this same Prohibition thread. Freelance writer Joy Baker conducted in-depth research on another individual named in the indictment, Hermann J. Kohl, a German immigrant holding a PhD in chemistry. Beginning in 1924—five years into Prohibition—Kohl ran his own fragrance company, Norda Essential Oils and Chemical Company in New York City. According to Baker’s research, Srebren, the kingpin, had taught chemists such as Kohl how to remove oils from alcohol not by distillation but, rather, by exposing the liquid to caustic soda. This would saponify the oil—turn it into a soap—which could then be more easily separated from the alcohol, possibly with the assistance of precipitation or distillation. After locating legal documents pertaining to the February 1930 indictment in the National Archives branch in New York (Northeast Region), she pursued the federal case files in the Chicago archives (Great Lakes Region), sifting through more than 1,500 pages of documents. These records indicated that Norda sold Srebren “large quantities of saponifiable oils and esters, to wit ‘Lilac 59’ . . . in violation of the National Prohibition Act.” Furthermore, Norda and Srebren shared warehouse space in Chicago, where Prohibition agents found products from both companies, including one-gallon bottles of perfume intermingled with bottles of whiskey. These records also include references to members of the Gambino mob family.20

Unfortunately, in the 1930s court transcripts were rarely preserved, as was the case here. But outcomes can often be determined by checking the court docket. The docket on Norda, case number 21145 in Chicago federal district court, ran to 21 pages and covered more than four-and-a-half years of litigation, from February 1930 to July 1934. (Prohibition ended on December 5, 1933). Long story short: what apparently happened with the conspiracy investigation was that the small operators could not afford to litigate; many of them pled guilty and were convicted within a few years of the indictment. But the major players were able to afford expensive lawyers, who drew out the investigation until, conveniently, Prohibition was overturned. At that point, the defendants could simply change their plea from “not guilty” to “no contest.” Since the law being prosecuted was no longer being enforced, they (including Hermann Kohl and Anastassoff Srebren) were released. We do not know the
outcome for the Sinykins and Amenrud, but the Nipola Company did outlive Prohibition.

What we do know from the Minneapolis Tribune’s early February report is that the criminal investigation had begun in July 1929 in Chicago when “prohibition agents discovered thousands of sub-standard toilet products capable of being redistilled into pure grain alcohol.” It is not clear what was meant by “sub-standard,” but it stands to reason that putting less essential oil into a perfume would make later removal easier. The bottles at MNHS, however, appear to contain typical—not sub-standard—perfumes; if anything, they could be considered quite strong. On the other hand, the Tribune article also mentioned that those named in the indictment utilized an “older practice, frequently used by bootleggers in the past under which the [industrial] alcohol, instead of being manufactured into perfumes, was diverted direct to bootleggers.”

S. B. Qvale, the Twin-Cities-based Northwest Prohibition administrator, was often quoted in the 1930 newspaper articles detailing the federal indictment. In one story, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported that he qualified the charges against Nipola, saying that the company name may have been used by members of a crime syndicate to cover up their illegal activities. Qvale took pains not to exonerate Nipola, but he also stated that the company might be guiltless; though it was listed in the syndicate’s records as the receiver of misappropriated industrial alcohol, the company might neither have ordered nor received “a drop of it.” He went on to reveal that he had personally checked on Nipola many times and had always found it to be operating within the bounds of the law.

The analysis seems to confirm that our alcoholic liquid could, indeed, be considered perfume. Furthermore, small vials of Lucky Lindy and other Nipola scents, recently donated to the Society, suggest that the company sold legitimate perfumes in quantities meant for individual use. Nevertheless, in the light of library and archival research, it seems likely that Nipola also engaged in illegal activities—and our one-gallon bottles were an integral part of a large criminal conspiracy during a very interesting, tumultuous period in American history.

Notes

5. Morris, Fragrance, 10, 5.
7. Morris, Fragrance, 8, xv, 43.
9. See, for example, Minneapolis Tribune, St. Paul Pioneer Press, and St. Paul Daily News, all Feb. 11, 1930; Capital Times (Madison, WI), Feb. 10, 1930; Wichita Daily Times (Wichita Falls, TX), Feb. 10, 1930.
10. Here and below, Minneapolis Tribune, Feb. 11, 1930.
11. Incorporation records are maintained by the Minnesota Secretary of State and can be found at mbsportal.sos.state.mn.us; Nipola Company, Inc. is file number 18545-AA. Copies of the St. Paul City Directory are in the MNHS library.
13. Willmar Tribune, Sept. 4, 1918; U.S., Census, Population, 1930, Minneapolis, e.d. 27-127, sheet 4B, and 1940, Spokane, e.d. 41-38, sheet 11B, also showing that Amenrud lived in Hennepin Co. in 1935; Minneapolis City Directories, MNHS.
14. For the Egyptian revival and Egyptian-themed perfumes from the era, see www.ebay.com/gds/The-Egyptian-Revival-/1000000000 2556140/g.html. On Oriental odor, see Morris, Fragrance, 48. The Swee-Tone label also recommends not spraying it on polished furniture, presumably because the alcohol would damage the varnish.
15. Here and two paragraphs below, for exemptions, see https://marymiley.wordpress.com/2012/05/05/prohibition-exemptions-how-to-get-legal-alcohol-du ring-the-twenties/. The Star Tribune (Minneapolis), Oct. 27, 2014, reported that an antique wine and liquor collector in Pennsylvania who was selling some of his collection was charged with illegally reselling alcohol without a liquor license. Pennsylvania’s current liquor code (instituted to discourage drinking when Prohibition ended) specifies the only two ways to dispose of illegal liquor: destruction via the sewer or donation to a hospital.
17. Morris, Fragrance, 173. Bergamot is a citrus fruit that grows only in southern Italy, parts of France, and Turkey. The fruit is usually not consumed, but the rind is used to produce oil. Many recognize bergamot oil as the scent of Earl Grey tea; the rind is also used in marmalade and Turkish delight. Because its scent is less striking than that of most other citrus oils, bergamot serves as a base in many perfumes, combining with other scents in a way that allows them to better complement each other.

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